



Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition

P.O. Box 6753, Huntington, WV 25773-6753

Fax 304-522-4079 • Ph. 304-522-0246

www.ohvec.org

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Contact: Janet Keating, OVEC
(304) 522-0246 janet.ovec@gmail.com

Aaron Isherwood, Sierra Club Sr. Attorney
(415) 977-5680 aaron.isherwood@sierraclub.org

GLOBAL ACCLAIM & RECOGNITION FOR WV ENVIRONMENTALIST CONTINUES MARIA GUNNOE RECEIVES 2010 DAVID BROWER AWARD FROM LAWA

Maria Gunnoe, West Virginia anti-mountaintop removal activist and community outreach organizer for the Ohio Valley Environmental Coalition (OVEC), is the recipient of this year's David Brower Lifetime Achievement Award from the Land, Air, Water Association, the nation's oldest student environmental law society.

Gunnoe received the honor on February 28 at the Public Interest Environmental Law Conference (PIELC) in Oregon after delivering the keynote address.

In the past year Gunnoe has been recognized nationally for her grassroots community organizing work opposing mountaintop removal and preservation of the ancient Appalachian Mountains. She was the Goldman Environmental Prize recipient for North America last year, an award viewed as the equivalent of a Nobel Prize in the environmental movement. These awards join the growing list of honors Gunnoe has received. She was the 2005 recipient of the WV Environmental Council's Environmental Courage Award, the 2006 Joe Calloway Award for Civic Courage and the Rainforest Action Network's 2007 David vs. Goliath Award.

The David Brower award is presented by the Land, Air, Water Association (LAWA) in honor of David Brower, former executive director of the Sierra Club whose life was committed to environmental protection and activism. The award is given annually to honor activists and lawyers who exemplify Brower's vision and his initiatives. Past recipients include acclaimed folk-singer and activist Pete Seeger, pioneering wildlife and wildlands preservationist Lou Gold, and WVU Law Professor Patrick McGinley who has been a tireless advocate for environmental enforcement and mine safety.

"OVEC is so proud of Maria," said Dianne Bady, OVEC's co-director and founder. "She loves very deeply—she loves her family, she loves her community. She learned from her Cherokee grandfather to feel herself to be a part of the land that surrounds her.

"When the mountains around her started disappearing, she keenly felt that loss as an injury to her own spirit. Maria's activism is love in action," Bady said.

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The daughter of a coal miner, Gunnoe was born and raised in Boone County, West Virginia. She and her husband Richard were raising their children on her family's land in Bob White when mountaintop removal wreaked havoc on her land and her life.

A mining operation began near her home making the water undrinkable. The stream on her property was issued a permit declaring it a "National Pollution Discharge Elimination System." A toxic and dangerous valley fill was placed precariously above her land where she and her family lived. These events, and more, spurred Gunnoe into action and advocacy.

She began volunteering with local advocacy groups and eventually began working full-time for OVEC, an organization based in Huntington, West Virginia. She was part of a federal lawsuit to repeal Jupiter's Holdings valley fill permits. She has appeared in numerous documentaries and news stories on the issue of mountaintop removal. As a result of her advocacy, she and her family have suffered harassment and have had to take security measures to ensure their safety.

Gunnoe's work has been recognized around the world. Last week she received an interview request from "The Bund," a highly respected newspaper in China. .

"I was shocked and honored when I was presented with the David Brower Lifetime Achievement Award," Gunnoe said. "The world needs to know that people in southern Appalachian communities have to contend with inhumane conditions in order to have jobs.

"Our mountains are being blown up for their coal, our people are dying and our communities are disappearing. This isn't just a local issue. People around the world care. They are watching and they want to help us save our mountains and communities."

Gunnoe's efforts and activism will continue to educate and raise public awareness about mountaintop removal and its devastating effects on Appalachia and the world at large. She is currently undertaking a campaign to buy property that mining interests want to use to further mountaintop removal. A website was launched recently in pursuit of this goal, www.mtstopshere.com, with the hope the property could be turned into an education center for people in southern Appalachia to combat mountaintop removal.

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